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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an honors program developed by the University of South Carolina at Aiken to increase educational opportunities for the academically well-qualified and highly motivated student. The paper focuses on participation in the program by the speech communication faculty. Students who qualify for the program contract with individual professors to complete special projects in regular academic courses. Students are encouraged to pursue contracts in courses both in and out of their major areas of study. Student/professor contracts are reviewed and must be approved by an Honors Steering Committee. Four of the honors contracts completed in speech communication concerned interpersonal communication, public communication, interviewing, and advanced public communication. The projects and methodologies are described in the paper. Students in the honors program benefited from working closely with professors of their choosing; non-honors students were stimulated and challenged by the presence of the honors students in the regular classroom; and all professors had the opportunity to work closely with academically gifted students. (MAH)

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CHALLENGING THE SUPERIOR STUDENT USING HONORS CONTRACTS

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CHALLENGING THE SUPERIOR STUDENT USING HONORS CONTRACTS

Many small universities and colleges face the challenge of developing an honors program that simultaneously receives the support of the administration, meets the needs of faculty, and offers diverse students the opportunity to grow intellectually. Such was the case in the spring of 1991 when a faculty committee at the University of South Carolina at Aiken was formed to develop an honors program which would increase the educational opportunities for the academically well-qualified and highly motivated student. The committee's task was challenging because little money was available for the program and because of the need to develop a program which would not have a deleterious effect on course offerings for non-honors students. Given these logistical challenges, the committee developed a program adapted to the needs of our students and campus. The purpose of this paper is to describe this program and focus on ways the speech communication faculty have been able to participate and offer honors work to interested students.

Considering the budgetary constraints, the small size of our campus (approximately 3000 students), and the "tight" scheduling and rotation of courses, the members of the honors committee decided that offering special courses just for honors students was not practical. Having an honors curriculum of special courses is one of the desired characteristics of an honors program, according to a report issued by the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) (Cummings, 1996, p. 36). Yet this same report also acknowledges that "no one model of an honors program

can be superimposed on all types of institutions" (p. 36). Although special honors sections could be established in multiple section courses without reducing course selection available to non-honors students, there were clear disadvantages of offering special honors courses at our small university. For example, almost all of the multiple section courses are freshmen or sophomore level, and the committee definitely wanted honors work available in upper level courses. This criterion is also in keeping with another NCHC guideline for honors programs. That guideline is:

> The program should be so formulated that it relates effectively both to all the college work for the degree (e.g., by satisfying general education requirements) and to the area of concentration, departmental specialization, pre-professional or professional training. (Cummings, 1996, p. 36)

The committee was also concerned that some disciplines offer no multiple section courses, and the committee did not wish to exclude those disciplines from offering honors work. They concurred with Bernice Braid who wrote in The National Honors Report (1995) that it is the responsibility of an honors program "to present as much opportunity for choice as possible" (p. 67).

Given these guidelines and logistical realities, the committee designed an honors program based on a contract format. Instead of taking specially designated classes, those students who qualify for the honors program contract with individual professors to complete special projects in regular academic courses. Students are encouraged to pursue contracts in courses both in and out of their major areas of study, so that, for

example, a biology major is encouraged to complete honors work in a speech communication or art history course. Students are urged to initiate the possibility of honors work with the professor of their choice, and the decision to pursue the honors project is a mutual one. Once the decision is made, the pair must complete a contract proposal which is due at the end of the third week of the semester and which must be approved by an Honors Steering Committee. The Steering Committee and Honors Program Director carefully scrutinize all proposed honors contracts to assure that a high level of quality is being required.

Participation in the honors program has a number of benefits for the exceptional student. First, the program provides honors students with an opportunity to work more closely with professors of their choosing, and hopefully, have more dialogue and individualized attention from those professors. Second, the contracted project can be tailored to meet the shared interests of the student and the professor. Students can explore less familiar areas, gain an even greater understanding in areas of expertise, or expand their knowledge of allied areas. The choice is theirs. By choosing the areas in which to pursue honors projects, students enhance their undergraduate curriculum and take greater responsibility for their education. Third, the contract format makes the honors program accessible to students who have severe scheduling restrictions. As the Director of the USCA Honors Program notes (Rich, 1996):

> Since our 3,000 students are primarily commuters, since we have an increasingly non-traditional age student body, and since many of our students are part-timers, our Honors Program can easily be adapted to the Honors students' varied needs. (p. 4)

Thus a student who is free only to take classes during a limited time span can still participate in the program. All in all, the contract format of this honors program offers the superior student substantial benefits.

This program also has an advantage to non-honors students because the honors students remain in the regular classroom. As the Director of the USCA Honors Program explains (Rich, 1996), "By continuing to be 'mainstreamed' and not placed in special Honors sections or courses, our Honors students are able to offer their special talents to their other classmates" (p.3). The classroom environment is likely to be more stimulating and challenging when honors students are in the regular classroom.

Participation in this program is clearly beneficial to students, but also offers advantages to participating faculty. The first and most significant advantage is that the contract format provides all professors the opportunity to work closely with academically gifted students. The importance of challenging ourselves as we help honor students "stretch" their experiences and discoveries was noted in a recent issue of The National Honors Report (1995):

> Stretching ourselves by stretching honors; stretching honors by stretching ourselves -- these are our route to expanding the conscious worlds of our students....Not incidentally, it is our route to expanding our own worlds, as well -- and that opportunity is a gift for which we who work in honors should be eternally grateful. (p. 67)

In addition, the second and more quantifiable advantage is a pragmatic one. Honors contracts are treated like independent studies, and when professors complete ten contracts, they are entitled to a

one-course reduction in their teaching load for one semester.

As faculty in the Department of Communications began to design honors contracts, we followed two main guidelines. First, a contract had to broaden a student's knowledge by providing content that typically would not be covered in the course. Second, a contract had to ask a student to demonstrate her or his ability to apply their knowledge. With these two guidelines in mind, faculty members work individually with students to create honors contract projects that broaden and enrich the students' understanding of the course material while complementing the faculty member's interests and/or current pursuits. Students have completed honors contracts in a variety of speech communication courses from Interpersonal Communication to Interviewing to Advanced Public Communication. Below are project descriptions for four of the honors contracts completed in speech communication.

Example of a Project in Interpersonal Communication

Description: The student will examine the elements of effective doctor/patient interaction, paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication aspects of effective dentist/patient interactions. She will also explore the impact of culture on communication within this setting.

Methodology/Approach: 1. Conduct library research regarding effective doctor/patient communication. 2. Make at least one observation in a dental practice. 3. Conduct at least one interview with a practicing dentist. 4. Meet with the professor regularly during the term to discuss findings. 5. Write an eight to ten page paper identifying and discussing the verbal and nonverbal aspects of effective dentist/patient communication.

Example of a Project in Public Communication

Description: The student will analyze selected speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. She will compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies used by the two speakers.

Methodology/Approach: 1. Conduct library research on methods of rhetorical analysis. 2. Conduct library research on the historical context of the speeches and on the two speakers.

3. Locate speeches from available audio, video and print sources. 4. Write a rhetorical analysis paper of at least eight pages. 5. Present the findings orally in the public speaking class in an eight to ten minute speech.

Example of a Project in Interviewing

Description: In this project the student will learn about the role of interviewing within the legal profession and will also gain experience in interviewing by designing and conducting interviews with lawyers.

Methodology/Approach: 1. Conduct library research on the role and use of the interview in the legal profession. 2. Develop a moderately scheduled interview guide for interviewing lawyers. 3. Conduct at least six interviews following the guide. 4. Meet with the professor after the second and sixth interview to discuss learning points about conducting the interview. 5. Write a five to seven page paper comparing and contrasting the theory of interviewing with the practice of interviewing within the legal profession.

Example of a Project in Advanced Public Communication

Description: The student will give two public presentations to audiences outside the classroom. The two presentations must be on different topics, must be at least ten minutes in length, must be presented to two audiences with diverse interests, and must incorporate all critical elements of effective speaking. The professor and student must mutually agree on the topic and audience. (Note: When the honors project was designed the audiences had not been selected. The student ended up speaking on different topics to one audience of high school students placed in an alternate school due to discipline violations and to another audience of Lions Club members.)

Methodology/Approach: 1. Research speech topics and audiences. 2. Prepare speeches following all guidelines discussed in class and in the course textbook. 3. Give speeches. At least one must be video taped; the other may be audio taped. 4. Analyze the taped speeches and complete self-evaluations for both speeches. 5. Meet with the professor after she has evaluated the speeches for an oral assessment.

As the four honors contracts suggest, the students who choose to pursue honors projects in their speech communication classes are encouraged to explore in greater depth their own interests. In so doing, they are working collaboratively with their professors and applying their in-class learning while also engaging in thoughtful self reflection. In most cases, the

honors students enrich the classroom by sharing the results of their efforts, whether they do so formally or informally. Finally, as noted, the projects are enriching for faculty. In addition to the satisfaction of working with superior students, the participating faculty can work with students to explore areas of interest, and also to try projects or assignments they may later use in the regular classroom. In summary, an honors program which makes use of honors contracts is a viable means to challenge the exceptional student in the smaller college or university.

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